

RETURNING PRIDE BACK INTO IOWA STATE PARKS

- A Balanced Plan for Increased Expenditures -

Introduction

Iowa's state parks host 14 million visitors a year, with over 700,000 of them being overnight guests in cabins and campgrounds. Many visitors have celebrations of significant life events in state parks, such as birthdays, graduation parties, weddings, and family reunions. Many of these events become a part of longstanding traditions that over time create a strong sense of pride in Iowa state parks.

Iowa's 50 core state parks and several satellite areas contain a multitude of facilities and land areas. A small sample of the total inventory includes 56,000 acres, 5,154 campsites, 86 rental cabins, 147 picnic shelters, 75 modern restrooms, 67 shower buildings, 620 miles of multi-purpose trails, and 51 office/maintenance buildings. All these facilities require routine maintenance to provide safe services to park visitors and help prevent major and costly disrepairs. A myriad of equipment that uses fuel and requires routine maintenance to assure longevity and safe operation is used to maintain the grounds and facilities.

The three line items in the state park budget that primarily feed money for these purposes are facilities maintenance, equipment maintenance, and equipment purchase. The work is accomplished with a combination of permanent staff, seasonal workers, and volunteers. The Governor's budget for the Environment First Fund includes increases from \$3.71 million in the current fiscal year to \$6.61 million in FY 14 and to \$4.61 million in FY 15. These increases equate to \$2.9 million for FY 2015 and \$900,000 for FY 15. A balanced approach to increased spending will be strategically implemented in all state parks for facilities maintenance, equipment maintenance, equipment purchases, seasonal workers, and volunteers. A smaller overall commitment will be given to adding permanent employees in order to be able to sustain the new employees over time given the lesser money proposed for FY 15. Seasonal workers can accomplish significantly more projects by providing them with supplies, materials, and quality equipment. A list of projects to be accomplished over the next two years will be prepared for each state park and will serve as the guide for effective use the increased funds.

Facility Maintenance

The facility maintenance line item is used to purchase all the supplies required to maintain state park campgrounds, cabins, lodges, shelters, picnic tables, restrooms, signs, beaches, trails, bridges, office, maintenance shop, and storage buildings. A few examples are plumbing and electrical supplies, caulk, paint, lumber, roofing material, nails, screws, bolts, and cleaning supplies. The condition of facilities can make or break a quality park visitor experience. The increase in this line item will be \$600,000 in FY 14 and \$160,000 in FY 15.

Equipment Maintenance

The equipment maintenance line item is used to safely and efficiently operate the equipment required to maintain state park grounds and manage natural resource areas, including tractors, mowers, skid steers, trailers, and utility vehicles. A few examples of purchases are gasoline, diesel fuel, oil, filters, mower blades, tires, and repair parts and labor. Inadequate money in this line items results in inefficient

equipment, extensive equipment downtime, and unsafe operation. The increase in this line item will be \$600,000 in FY 14 and \$160,000 in FY 15.

Equipment Purchase

The equipment purchase line item used to buy the major equipment required to maintain state park grounds and manage natural resource areas, including tractors, mowers, skid steers, trailers, and utility vehicles. Commercial grade equipment is best since much of it is used daily for extended periods of time. Experience has shown that it is best to establish an equipment replacement regiment to minimize downtime, reduce repair expenses, and have a decent trade-in value. A large backlog of needed equipment replacement currently exists since very little money has been available over the last four years to purchase new equipment. The goal is to reestablish the replacement regiment as soon as possible. The increase in this line item will be \$450,000 in FY 14 and \$30,000 in FY 15.

Seasonal Employees

The number of seasonal employees make or break the condition of state parks in the peak summer season. These workers do most of the grass mowing and trimming, cleaning buildings, gathering trash, scooping ashes from fire rings, and serving as the contact for park visitors during permanent staff's time off. Some of these workers serve as park interpreters giving guided nature hikes, campground programs, roving education, and outdoor skills demonstrations. Other workers are assigned to the invasive species eradication program to operate specialty equipment for converting infested areas into prairies and high quality woodlands.

The summer of 2007 was the last year seasonal workers could be considered in full force, with 86 FTEs equating to approximately 300 summer workers distributed throughout the park system. This averaged 6.5 workers per park, with the range being anywhere between 2 and 18 depending on the size of the park and number of facilities.

The legislature directed that 50 FTEs of seasonal workers be hired in FY 2012 and FY 2013. Fifty FTEs of summer workers equate to 173 workers at an average of 600 hours during the peak season costing a total of \$1.066 million for the fiscal year. The increase in this line item will be \$500,000 in FY 2014, which will allow for 240 seasonal workers. In FY 15, 185 seasonal workers will be employed with an increase of \$150,000.

State Parks Volunteer Program

The legislature appropriated \$250,000 in FY 2012 to encourage volunteerism in state parks. This money was used to purchase materials and supplies for volunteer projects. It proved to be a very popular and successful approach. Ninety-five (95) volunteer groups submitted applications requesting a total of \$700,000. We were able to fund 68 projects with the \$250,000, with 22,000 volunteer hours pledged and \$93,000 of private matching funds.

The proposal for FY 2014 is to reinstate the State Parks Volunteer Program at the original level of \$250,000. The program would not continue in FY 15.

Permanent Employees

The backbone of Iowa State Parks is the permanent employees assigned to the parks throughout the state. Surveys show that a visitor's experience is enhanced when contact is made with a knowledgeable, helpful park employee. Four years ago, 91 full-time employees worked in Iowa's 50 core state parks performing facility maintenance, law enforcement, resource management, and interpretation/public information. At the beginning of FY 2013, just 73 employees are working in these same 50 parks because funds have not allowed any filling of vacancies created by retirements and resignations. New vacancies occurring in FY 13 are being filled. Twenty-eight parks have just one full-time employee. State parks are open from 4:00 AM to 10:30 PM, which equates to 129.5 hours a week. An employee working alone in a state park during a 40-hour work week is readily available to park visitors just 30% of the time the park is open. This is not a good percent of coverage for quality public service.

The proposal for FY 14 and 15 is to hire 4 new permanent park employees in areas of greatest need, which are park rangers in Gull Point Complex and Big Creek and natural resource technicians in Mines of Spain and Lewis and Clark. Gull Point Complex in the Okoboji area and Big Creek near Des Moines receive high park visitation that requires additional law enforcement coverage. Mines of Spain and Lewis and Clark State Parks have large, year round interpretive centers that require full-time staff to keep them open to the public. The addition of these four positions will cost \$200,000 in FY 14 and FY 15.

Miscellaneous Increases

The "cost of doing business" in state parks increases annually due to inflation, cost of fuel, and cost of electricity. These costs are reflected through several line items throughout the budget. This balanced plan allocates \$300,000 in FY 14 and \$200,000 in FY 15 for miscellaneous increases.

Summary of FY 2014 and 2015 State Parks Budget Increase

Budget Category	FY 2013	Proposed FY 2014 Increase	Proposed FY 2015 Increase
Facility Maintenance	\$375,972	\$600,000	\$160,000
Equipment Maintenance	\$362,212	\$600,000	\$160,000
Equipment Purchase	\$166,175	\$450,000	\$30,000
Seasonal Employees	\$1,066,000	\$500,000	\$150,000
Volunteer Program	\$0	\$250,000	\$0
Permanent Employees	\$7,158,767	\$200,000	\$200,000
Misc. Increases		\$300,000	\$200,000
TOTAL	\$9,129,126	\$2,900,000	\$900,000

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